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ABSTRACT

Dependence on standardized tests in adult literacy programs derives partly from their relative ease of adminstration and their appearance of providing valid and reliable quantitative data for program evaluation. Few adult educators are satisfied with the quality of the information, and most are extremely dissatisfied with the effects of such testing on teaching and learning. Literacy practitioners, researchers, and theorists have been working together and separately to seek alternatives and reinvent assessment. This movement is based on learner-centered or participatory approaches that are congruent with recent cross-cultural and ethnographic research. To understand and assess the literacy practices of different adult learners, alternative assessment explores the particular types of reading and writing that adults themselves see as meaningful under different circumstances and that reflect their own needs and aspirations. Most important, these new approaches communicate respect for adults. Procedures for assessing learner progress often include scripted or ethnographic interviews, conducted by students with students or by administrators or teachers/tutors with students. Some programs use profiles or inventories; others integrate assessment with instruction. Support is needed to build networks to share questions and findings about alternatives to traditional methods of assessment. (YLB)

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Focus on Basics

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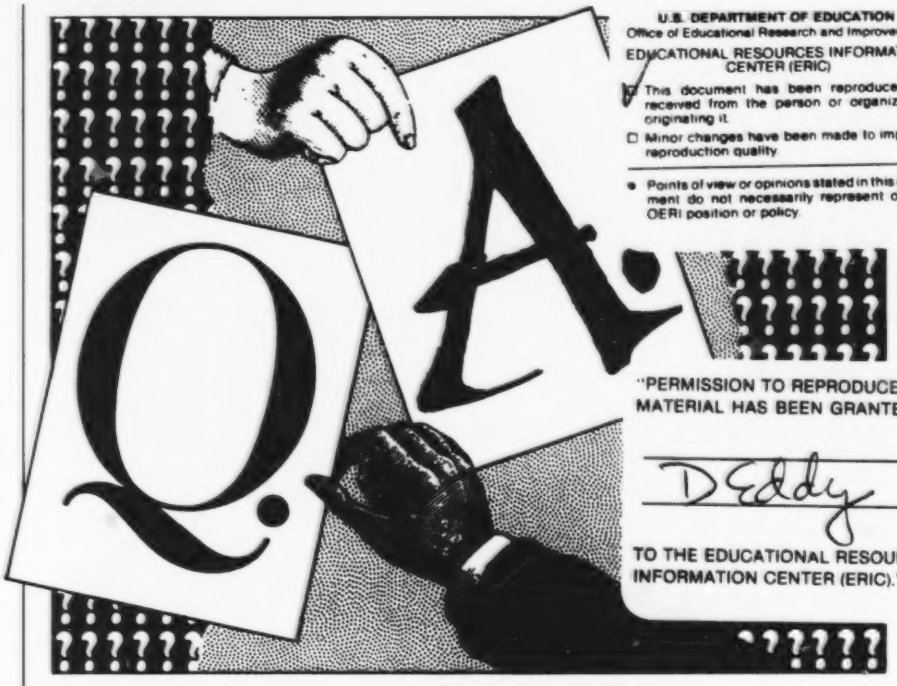

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From The Inside Out: Reinventing Assessment

Participants in the growing national dialogue about assessing learner progress enter the conversation from a variety of perspectives. Most agree that decisions about the nature and purpose of assessment have become critically important to literacy policy and practice at all levels of the system. Adult learners, teachers and tutors, program administrators, and funders all concur that what programs choose to assess and their methods for doing so dramatically affect the quality and outcomes of teaching and learning.

There is considerably less agreement about the efficacy of different approaches to assessment and the interests which they serve. Many, if not most, literacy programs assess individual learners with commercially available standardized tests of reading achievement. Although heavily criticized by university and program-based researchers and practitioners, the tests are still widely used. In a recent symposium in Washington, D.C., designed to explore new approaches to adult literacy assessment, for example, seven of the ten invited presenters reported use of standardized tests (e.g. the TABE or ABLE) as their primary mode of assessment.

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Innovative teaching practices for adults.

FOCUS ON BASICS is a resource bulletin providing adult educators with information on innovative and effective teaching practices currently used in basic skills programs throughout the country. *FOCUS ON BASICS* is published by **World Education**, a non-profit organization with over 35 years of experience working with adults in disadvantaged communities both in this country and overseas. **World Education** is dedicated to promoting approaches that involve learners in their own education and assist teachers with the development of low-cost, locally-specific materials.

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Dependence on standardized tests in adult literacy programs undoubtedly derives in part from their relative ease of administration and their appearance of providing valid and reliable quantitative data for program evaluation. The equation of learner progress assessment (defined as increasing reading levels) with program evaluation is problematic in two ways: (1) it ignores other legitimate criteria for evaluating a literacy program (e.g. quality of curriculum and teaching, connection to significant community issues), and (2) it fails to recognize that increases in reading levels have little to do with the way adults live in the world. Once again, as Carman St. John Hunter pointed out in a recent issue of World Education's REPORTS Magazine, the failure to change is attributed to an individual's illiteracy, while literacy itself is seen as the remedy, and literacy instruction, a remedial program.

Despite the convenience of standardized tests and the numbers they provide, few adult educators are satisfied with the quality of the information and most are extremely dissatisfied with the effects of such testing on teaching and learning. Standardized tests reflect assumptions about reading and notions of progress — i.e. reliance on grade level equivalencies — which many argue are inappropriate and misleading for use with adults. Assessing decontextualized skills of word recognition and paragraph comprehension seems incongruent with the diversity of literacy practices in everyday life and the range of purposes for which adults seek instruction. When literacy is defined as a set of neutral and technical skills, and adults are informed that their reading performance is comparable to second or third graders, much more is being communicated than an objective description of ability (see Michael Holzman, "Evaluation in Adult Literacy Programs," in *Writing as Social Action*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, forthcoming Spring 1989). As John Gordon, a teacher and program director in New York, puts it, "The emotional power of the standardized test is hard to counteract, among both teachers and students. Confusion and ambivalence about goals and philosophy often result."

Seeking Alternatives

The call for alternatives to traditional procedures is coming from many participants in literacy education. Teachers and tutors in different types of programs recognize that learners bring their own intentions or purposes, considerable prior knowledge of language, and diverse strategies for organizing and using what they know. Drawing on current theory and classroom research in language and learning as well as their own experience, many teachers also understand that reading and writing are social and meaning-making processes. They are best learned — and assessed — together and in relation to the particular goals and interests of groups and individuals.

Assessment that serves the educational needs of adults must be an informing process in the positive sense. To build on learners' strengths and capture more of the richness and complexity of adult learning seem important goals for alternative forms of assessment.

In theory, assessment can be designed to serve a variety of purposes and constituencies, but if it fails to serve learning, its other attributes are of little consequence.

The author's Adult Literacy Evaulation Project has developed innovative ways of assessing learners at The Center for Literacy in Philadelphia.

Reinventing Assessment

In the last several years, literacy practitioners, researchers and theorists have been moving together and separately to reinvent assessment. This movement is based on learner-centered or participatory approaches that are congruent with recent cross-cultural and ethnographic research. The research offers a compelling picture of multiple literacies — diverse literacy practices within and across contexts. Focusing on the social, political and economic nature of these practices, studies such as those of Brian Street, Shirley Brice Heath or Scribner and Cole reinforce the notion that standardized measures reflect not a universal literacy but attribute value to particular literacy conventions.

The search for alternatives to traditional assessments also derives strength from more than a decade of significant research on the intellectual and social processes of reading and writing. We have information, for example, about the part "metacognition" or knowledge of one's own thinking plays in the strategic control of language processes. We now understand more about the significant role of a reader's or writer's prior knowledge in acquiring and developing literacy, and we recognize that since meanings are made in the context of prior meanings, people can be expected to differ stylistically in the ways they read and write.

To understand and assess the literacy practices of different adult learners, alternative assessment explores the particular types of reading and writing which adults themselves see as meaningful under different circumstances and which reflect their own needs and aspirations. If literacy is culturally learned and practiced, what is important is what counts as literacy to different groups and individuals within the society. From this perspective, both teachers and students have the potential to learn more about what constitutes growth or change in learners' intentions, in their knowledge of specific uses and functions of literacy, and in the varied literacy events or activities in which they participate.

Learner-Centered Assessment

By definition, learner-centered or participatory assessment differs considerably from program to program, teacher to teacher, and learner to learner. However, in many of the grassroots research and staff development projects currently underway several general features are emerging:

- Adults are active participants, co-investigators in determining and describing their own literacy practices, strengths and strategies. Whether initiated by an administrator, teacher/tutor, or by adults themselves, the design and implementation of the procedures constitute a dialogue or collaboration.
- Rather than adhering strictly to a pre-determined script, learner-centered assessment involves dynamic exchanges among learners, texts and teachers/tutors. When difficulties are encountered, assistance is given rather than withheld; the social situation provides a supportive context for experimentation and risk-taking.
- Current students may play a role in designing and assisting with the assessment of incoming students.
- Assessment occurs initially and throughout the literacy program, not just to establish "entrance" and "exit" criteria, but to serve a variety of purposes including self-

Photographs courtesy of the Center for Literacy

assessment, placement, program monitoring, materials selection, curriculum design, teaching, etc.

- Assessment is eclectic, involving the use of a variety of procedures rather than depending on a single process.
- Assessment is assumed to be a learning experience (i.e. not bracketed and separated in time and place) and thus is increasingly enacted in classroom settings and integrated with the curriculum.
- Assessment is increasingly interrelated with other facets of the program — e.g. staff development, referral, and placement.
- What's assessed reflects the particular goals of the learners and often includes (a) literacy practices in everday life (how adults are using what they've learned and what significance these things have in their lives), (b) varieties of tasks and strategies for reading and writing particular texts in specific contexts, as well as (c) learners' perceptions or theories of reading and writing.
- Practitioner research in alternative modes of assessment contributes to inter-program communication and helps to build communities of adult educators.

Probably most important, these new approaches to assessment communicate respect for adults —for what they bring to learning and for what they come to learn. Alternative approaches to assessment assume that adults make decisions about literacy within the contexts of their own lives.

Assessment Strategies

Procedures for assessing learner progress often include interviews, scripted or ethnographic, conducted by students with students (see "Effective Practice" this issue) or by administrators or teachers/tutors with students (see the Adult Literacy Evaluation Project, "Blackboard" this issue). Some programs use various inventories or profiles, often based on data collected over time from participants in a particular program. To explore the role of literacy in everyday life, learners describe the variety of contexts in which they engage in literacy practices including what, where, when and with whom they read and write as well as how they go about it. Home, community and work environments contribute to a picture of the social networks and contexts in which adults currently use or may want to use literacy. Successful learning and teaching experiences in other domains outside of those involving literacy may also be discussed and their relation to learning literacy explored.

By integrating assessment with instruction, classroom discussions and projects may also be viewed as contexts for assessing progress. As learners consider themes and problems related to their own lives, for example, there is a continuous fund of information from which to determine strengths, interests and future inquiries.

Directions and Implications

If accountability to funders and legislators remains limited to the results of standardized tests, all of these promising efforts in the direction of learner-centered assessment may have little impact beyond individual programs. Lacking good information about the qualitative effects of programs on learners' lives, emphasis nationally will continue to be placed on increasing the number of adults enrolled in programs, and program evaluation will continue to be limited to restricted measures of learner progress.

What's needed in part may be wider participation in these conversations about alternatives. Program-based practitioner research conducted simultaneously in many sites across the country is perhaps the most promising route to developing an array of workable learner-centered alternatives. Mutual efforts to rethink assessment have already resulted in new linkages among programs, universities, centers and other organizations which have combined their resources to address this problem. But more support is needed to build these networks, so that we can share questions and findings.

The community of adult educators, adult learners, and others needs to strengthen these new conceptual frameworks, to exchange and critique innovative practices, and to develop strategies for disseminating this information more broadly. Perhaps then we can begin a more meaningful dialogue about assessment policy at other levels of the system.

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